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Around the Americas

Sandinistas attract a Who's Who of terrorists

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua — He is a 5-foot-11, gray-eyed surgeon, treating children in a Managua slum. She is a petite journalist, writing for a Paris magazine. Both are fugitives, wanted in their native Italy for leading left-wing guerrilla gangs.

Two West Germans linked to the Baader-Meinhof Gang are now officers in the People's Sandinista Army. One is in charge of a counterintelligence unit. The other commands an artillery battalion.

And an Argentine Montonero guerrilla, widow of the Argentine rebel who led the commando team that assassinated former Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza in Paraguay, is dating a ranking Nicaraguan official trained as a guerrilla by the PLO in Lebanon in the early 1970s.

These are but a few of the left-wing extremists from Europe and Latin America who came to Managua after the 1979 Sandinista revolution, seeking safe haven and a chance to prove their solidarity with the Nicaraguan government.

It is the same kind of revolutionary "networking" — leftist militants call it "internationalism" — that befitted the Sandinistas during their long guerrilla struggle to topple Somoza.

In the late 1960s, the Sandinistas signed a pact with the Palestine Liberation Organization to train Nicaraguan guerrillas in Lebanon. Somoza was a steadfast supporter of Israel, and Nicaragua was one of the first nations to recognize the Israeli state in 1948.

A former Israeli intelligence agent once based in Nicaragua said at least 150 Sandinistas were trained in the 1970s in Lebanon camps run by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the PLO faction most committed to terrorism in Europe and the Middle East.

Veteran Sandinistas say that it was at the PFLP camps that the

Nicaraguans first met European leftists — Germans from the Baader-Meinhof Gang and its spin-offs; Italians from the Red Brigades and other radical groups — and began establishing the close personal relationships that persist today.

"The European leftists believe that the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Quebrada del Yuro run through their countries, too," said one Sandinista official, referring to a key guerrilla supply line in the Vietnam War and the Bolivian gully where famed guerrilla chief Ernesto "Che" Guevara was killed in 1967.

One PLO-trained Sandinista, Patricio Arguello, joined the PFLP's most notorious terrorist, Leila Khaled, in a botched attempt to hijack an Israeli jetliner from Amsterdam to New York on Sept. 6, 1970. Israeli security agents killed Arguello and captured Khaled, who was later exchanged for hostages seized by another group of PFLP hijackers. The Sandinistas have named a geothermal power plant after Arguello.

Another PLO-trained Nicaraguan was Communications Minister Enrique Schmidt, killed in combat with anti-Sandinista guerrillas last November. Schmidt's widow, a West German citizen born in the Basque region of Spain, now works for the Sandinista Front's Department of Political Education. Health Ministry workers say she lectured them last year on the ideology of the Basque Homeland and Liberty guerrilla group, known as ETA, fighting for independence from Spain.

Yet another Sandinista trained in Lebanon is Deputy Interior Minister Rene Vivas. He is now dating an Argentine Montonero guerrilla, the widow of Julio Alfredo Irurzun, head of the Montonero team that assassinated Somoza in Paraguay in September 1980, in what the killers called a show of "revolutionary solidarity" with Nicaragua.



'It's a lie,' Defense Minister Humberto Ortega says of reports that Nicaragua harbors leftist fugitives from around the world. 'We do not require that type of support to defend our principles.'

The PLO now has a fully accredited embassy in Managua. And the Sandinista Front has "fraternal" relations with leftist groups from Italy, West Germany, Spain's Basque region, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Colombia, Libya, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica.

The Italian government on Feb. 8 gave the Sandinistas a list of 22

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Italian leftists believed to be living in Nicaragua — about half of them wanted fugitives, the rest described only as "extremists." The Foreign Ministry said it knew nothing about the Italians but would investigate.

Topping the list, obtained by The Herald, is Guglielmi, now working at a government-run children's clinic in the Managua slum of Ciudad Sandino, was a top leader of the Unita Combattente Comunista, a guerrilla band that spun off from the Red Brigades in the late 1970s. He was convicted in absentia last June of kidnapping and sentenced to 22 years in prison.

Also on the list is a 33-year-old Milan sociologist wanted on a warrant charging her with "organizing and leading armed gangs in Italy and abroad." An Italian woman with the same name as the fugitive is a journalist accredited in Managua as correspondent for a Paris-based magazine that specializes in Third World issues.

The fugitive is also described in the international records as a member of a group that helped Guglielmi and three other Italian fugitives move from Paris to Nicaragua after the Italian government accused France in 1983 of harboring more than 200 wanted Italian militants.

The woman journalist in Managua declined comment when two Italian journalists tried to interview her last month. "I am not who you think I am," she said. Her name is known but omitted here because of the absence of proof that the journalist and the fugitive are the same.

Roberto Sandalo, 27, a Red Brigades defector living in Kenya, told Italy's Oggi news magazine

last month that five Brigadisti are now serving as officers in the Sandinista army. "That's a lie," Defense Minister Humberto Ortega said last week. "We do not require that type of support to defend our principles and our flags."

Sandinista government sources said two West Germans who have bragged of having been part of the Baader-Meinhof Gang are now serving in the army — one as a captain in an artillery unit stationed at the Montelimar base southwest of Managua and the other attached to a military counterintelligence unit.

A West German known only as "Fitz" has told friends there is a warrant for his arrest in Germany. "Fitz," described as an anarchist, fought in the Sandinista revolution and later worked as an administrator at the government-owned Julio Buitrago sugar mill.

Also living in Nicaragua is Peter Paul Zahl, a well-known West German writer with former links to Baader-Meinhof who spent four years in prison for the attempted murder of a policeman in Cologne, Germany. Friends said Zahl, who is not wanted for any other crimes, is in Bluefields setting up a theater group for the port's West Indian blacks.

Nicaraguan government officials said a handful of Basque ETA guerrillas also lived in Managua until 1983, when Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez, a strong Sandinista sympathizer, protested to the Managua government. Several ETA members moved to neighboring Costa Rica and some went to Venezuela, the officials said.

Gregorio Jimenez, 32, an ETA militant wanted by the Spanish government on terrorism charges, was arrested in Costa Rica in September 1983 and charged with plotting to assassinate Eden Pastora, leader of an anti-Sandinista guerrilla group based in Costa Rica.

Costa Rican Justice Ministry officials say Jimenez, still awaiting trial, has confessed that a Managua-based group of ETA rebels planned Pastora's assassination, without authorization from the Sandinistas, but as a sign of "revolutionary solidarity."

Since the revolution triumphed, Nicaragua has also been visited for varying periods by a string of leftist militants from Europe and Latin America, many of them simple political exiles, some of them well-known guerrilla leaders.

Mario Firmenich, head of Argentina's Montoneros, traveled legally through Nicaragua — once staying several days in the home of Interior Minister Tomas Borge — as well as Mexico and Costa Rica before the Buenos Aires government put out a warrant for his arrest. He was detained in Brazil last year and extradited to Argentina.

Two Baader-Meinhof gang members visited Nicaragua in 1980 to express their support for the Sandinistas and explain the reasons for their own struggle. They sought out three foreign journalists living in Managua and granted them interviews, one of the reporters said.

And Lauro Azzolini, 41, a Red Brigades founder sentenced in absentia to 30 years in prison for the 1978 kidnap-assassination of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, visited Nicaragua in early 1980 and tried to hold a news conference to explain Moro's slaying. Journalists invited to the conference said the Sandinistas blocked it.

Azzolini, alleged to have been the man who killed Moro with a close range blast from a Czechoslovak-made Skorpion machine pistol, was later captured in Italy and is in prison.